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FISH SCREEN ACT WOULD AID NORTHWEST IRRIGATORS

Appropriations awaited for up to \$25 million that would help irrigators in four states build fish-friendly screens and other passage devices

On November 13, 2000, President Clinton signed H.R.1444, the "Fisheries Restoration and Irrigation Mitigation Act," into law. The Act authorizes up to \$25 million in federal assistance for a voluntary fish screen and passage construction program for irrigation projects in Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington. These efforts are aimed at protecting the Northwest's endangered wild salmon as well as declining resident fish. The program now awaits funding through Congress.

The Act aims to decrease fish mortality by offering financial assistance to landowners who construct fish screens or other fish-diversion structures such as ladders at entrances to irrigation intakes. These structures help prevent juvenile salmon and other resident fish from straying into irrigation canals. Many farms in the Northwest are irrigated by water diverted from streams and rivers. Water is transported to farms by irrigation canals that are connected to streams and rivers. These canals pose a major risk to juvenile salmon, called smolts, migrating downstream to the ocean. Smolts die when they are diverted from the rivers and streams into irrigation ditches. Fish screens and other fish-friendly devices placed at entrances to irrigation diversions can prevent smolts from becoming stranded in the ditches, decreasing overall wild fish mortality rates in the Northwest.

The Service has expertise in managing fisheries resources and experience in undertaking voluntary cost-share programs with private landowners. Funding for the Act must be provided in future Congressional appropriation bills in order for the program to take effect, and thirty-five percent of the funding for each project must come from non-federal sources.

The Act's legislation was supported by numerous conservation, recreation and water user groups. The bill had bipartisan support in the House and Senate. Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.) and Rep. Greg Walden (R-Ore.), members of the House Resources Committee, were original cosponsors of the bill. The bill was approved by the House of Representatives on November 9, 1999 of last year. A similar measure was introduced in the Senate by Senator Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) and Senator Gordon Smith (R-Ore.) and was approved by the full Senate on April 13, 2000.

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses more than 530 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

NOTE: This news release and others can be viewed on either the Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific Regional home page on the Internet at <http://www.r1.fws.gov> or the National home page at: <http://www.fws.gov/r9extaff/renews.html>